



## **ALI FARKA TOURE RED & GREEN**

### **SLEEVE NOTES By Andy Kershaw**

There have been, in two decades of playing what is - by definition - unpopular music on the radio, only a handful of occasions where I've felt as a gambler must feel when he hits the jackpot and, one of those times was discovering the phenomenal Ali Farka Toure.

Sometime in 1986, and for reasons I can't remember, I was in Paris. With some time to kill, I headed for Barbès, a lively and predominantly north African neighbourhood. There, in a tiny African record shop, I spent an afternoon rummaging, listening and spending far too much money. The shop stocked mainly Zairian LPs - soukous at the time was becoming the Pan-African pop music, and threatening to wipe out many other regional varieties - but there was also quite a bit of west African music. The Salif Keita "Soro" phenomenon had already swept through the Kershaw & Peel programmes on Radio 1 so I piled on to the counter an industrial quantity of Malian, Guinean and Senegalese singers I'd not heard of before.

Then, like any fan who loves the process of record shopping – the nosiness, the rooting, the possibility of surprise, the chance rewarding discovery - I thought I'd check the bargain bin. My curiosity was tweaked there by an odd looking LP with a bright red sleeve. On the front cover was a slightly out-of-focus colour photograph, shabbily composed, of a family in a baked-earth compound somewhere in west Africa. The adults are squatting or sitting and a number of children are milling around. In the middle, partly obscured by a shrub, is a wiry man in blue robes and a yellow skull-cap. One hand is visible and he has fingers as long as Robert Johnson's. But no guitar or any other instrument is in the picture. In white lettering above the photo it says Ali Farka Toure. There is no album title. On the back is a list of the songs, a publication date of 1984 and - the only clues to its provenance - the logos of the Disques Esperance label and the French distributor Sono Disc. The inner sleeve is plain white.

"What's this?" I asked the shop's owner. He didn't know. "It's been in there a long time," he said. No doubt pleased with my reckless spending, he let me have it for next to nothing and bagged up my purchases. I didn't even have a quick listen to the curious red album in the shop.

Back home, I worked my way through the new LPs. Within seconds of putting on the first track of the Ali album I was out of my seat and pacing around the

kitchen. Just the opening bars of "La Drogue" told me this was something really special. I was gripped. What was this? It was blues but it was also deeply west African. The ringing acoustic guitar, the style of Ali's playing and the choice of blues scales reminded me of two American musicians: Lightnin' Hopkins and JB Lenoir. Could this be, I wondered, switching into barstool musicologist mode, The Missing Link? Was this style of blues, isolated in remote rural Africa for centuries, the very same music slaves had carried with them to the plantations of the American southern states? No, was the short answer to that. Ali turned out to be a big fan of American blues and had accumulated since his youth, quite a collection of cassettes. However on first hearing this music in the 60s he was struck by the similarities it bore to his own. "This is music that has been taken from here" he once said.

I needed to know more. Perhaps I called Sono Disc in Paris. I can't remember. But I quickly established Ali was Malian, that the record has not been a big seller and, no, nobody was sure of his whereabouts. Meanwhile, listeners to my programme were going bonkers. Whenever I played a track off the Red Album the response confirmed we'd discovered something outstanding - one of those African artists who had instant broad appeal, who could connect with listeners who previously did not think they were African music fans. It was the enthusiasm, almost desperation, of the listeners' reaction which impressed me. I was getting the type of enquiry about Ali - and one letter did actually say this - which might be best categorised as: "I was driving down the motorway last Thursday night, listening to your programme, when you played this fantastic blues track which you said was from somewhere in Africa I'd never heard of. I tried rummaging for a pen in the glove box but as I was doing 70mph... Please play it again. I must get this LP". (Well, now you have it, unavailable for years, but finally released internationally on CD.)

As the listeners' clamour grew louder, I was at some African music gig at London's Town and Country Club. There I bumped in to Anne Hunt, one of the founders of World Circuit, then more of a booking agency for African artists than a label. Anne mentioned that she was soon to make a trip to Mali. (No one went to Mali back then). I almost jumped on her. "You've got to find this guy called Ali Farka Toure," I told her. "We've got to bring him to the UK..." Well, Anne went to Mali, 'Red Album' in hand and put out a message on National Radio Mali to say she was looking for Ali. She did find him, semi-retired from music and by chance visiting Bamako from his village in the north of Mali. Within months he was making his UK debut in that same Town and Country club before his ecstatic new fans and travelling with me from his Saharan home of Niafunké along the Niger River to make a BBC radio documentary. World Circuit released his first British album and, well, you know the rest...

Just remember - next time you're in a record shop, don't overlook the bargain bin.

Andy Kershaw, BBC Radio 3, London, 2004.